DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 429 473 HE 031 848

AUTHOR Harrington, Charles; Lindy, Ingrid
TITLE The Use of Reflexive Photography in the Study of the Freshman Year Experience.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Indiana Association for Institutional Research (Nashville, IN, March 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Counseling; *College Environment; *College Freshmen; Cultural Pluralism; Diversity (Institutional); *Educational Attitudes; Higher Education; Peer Relationship; *Photography; Physical Environment; State Universities; *Student Attitudes; Student Personnel Services; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *University of Southern Indiana

ABSTRACT

This study used reflexive photography to examine the perceptions of college freshmen at the University of Southern Indiana. A random sample of 10 first-time, full-time, degree-seeking freshmen completed an initial interview and background questionnaire and were given a 27-exposure disposable camera to take pictures that would illustrate their impression of the university or help to describe their impressions. The participants were also asked to record their thoughts while taking the pictures, participate in a structured photo elicitation interview, and participate in a focus-group interview. A number of primary themes emerged in the students' photographs and in their discussions of them, including perceptions about the university's physical environment, interactions with faculty, interactions with other students, student support services, and career counseling and preparation for the future. Some of the positive aspects of the university experience cited were frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty, the development of deep friendships with peers, and the accessibility of the campus. Negative aspects of the university experience included the low level of racial diversity among student and faculty populations, the disruption of the on-campus flow of automobile traffic to accommodate construction, and the perceived lack of computer labs on campus. (Contains 36 references.) (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 429 473

The Use of Reflexive Photography in the Study of the Freshman Year Experience

Dr. Charles Harrington
Director of Institutional Research and
Assistant Professor of Management
University of Southern Indiana
8600 University Boulevard
Evansville, Indiana 47714
812-465-7020
cfharrin.ucs@smtp.usi.edu

Ms. Ingrid Lindy
Manager, Academic Information Systems
And Retention Program Evaluator
University of Southern Indiana
8600 University Boulevard
Evansville, Indiana 47714
812-465-7000
ilindy.ucs@smtp.usi.edu

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Charles Harrington

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Abstract

This study describes the study of first-year freshmen students' impressions of their experiences at a public four-year comprehensive university. A random sample of undergraduates were asked to take a series of photographs, representative of their impressions of the university and were asked to discuss the various underlying themes of their photographs in subsequent focus-group interviews. A number of primary themes emerged, including perceptions about the university's physical environment, interactions with faculty, interactions with other students, student support services, and career counseling and preparation for the future.

Introduction

During the last twenty years, a number of prominent scholars of higher education have posited theories as to why students depart higher education prior to the achievement of their educational and/or vocational goals. Much of the research conducted has been directed toward those student experiences which typify the "freshman year experience" Astin (1975, 1984), Gardner and Jewler (1985), Pascarella and Terenzini (1977, 1978, 1991), Tinto (1985, 1987, 1989), Pace (1984).

Many of the approaches to the study of this first year of college have been focused on two primary issues – the expectations that students entering an institution bring with them, and the experiences of students during that first year (Tinto, 1986; Zemsky and Odel,1983; Braxton, 1990). Some research addresses the cognitive gains during the year (Evans, Forney, and Guido-Dibrito, 1998; Pascarella, 1985) . Others have focused on student integration into the academic (Gordon,1985) , social (Stage, 1989) (Waterman and Waterman, 1972), and political (Pascarella, Terenzini, and Wolfe, 1985) fabric of the institution. Others focus still on the "match" between institution and student (Levitz and Noel, 1989; Feldman and Newcomb, 1994). Most of the studies mentioned above are quantitative in nature.

A new paradigm is required to elucidate and respond to the characteristics, needs, desires, demands, and expectations of today's college student. The entering freshmen class in American higher education face enormous political, economic, psychological, and social pressures - pressures unknown to the generations of students that have preceded them (Levin and Cureton, 1998). In is posited that institutions which have the foresight to more fully measure, understand, and respond to the expectations and experiences of their incoming students, stand a significantly greater likelihood to retaining their students (Tinto, 1985).

The primary purpose of this research was to investigate an alternative qualitative research methodology in the study of the freshman year experience. The approach outlined within the realms of this paper is a component of a more comprehensive study of first-time entering freshmen at a public, four-year institution.

The cohort under study are freshmen enrolled as first-time, full-time freshmen at the beginning of the Fall 1997 semester. The study has three principle components: an expectations survey (CSEX **cite)**, an experiences survey (CSEQ **cite)**, and a study of the development of student expectation and experience using the qualitative research method reflexive photography.

Expectation, Experience, and Student Integration

Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure attributes an student's decision to continue post-secondary education at a given institution to pre-entry characteristics, the student's short- and long-term academic and vocational goals and commitments, academic and social institutional engagement experiences, and academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987). Tinto also asserts that both academic and social integration are modified or intensified by a student's precollege commitment to attend a particular institution. Pascarella (1985) suggested a general model that includes more explicit consideration of both an institution's structural characteristics and its general environment.

Students have expectations of what will transpire within the classroom; the type and nature of contacts with faculty, staff, and with other students; the opportunities that students will have for involvement with student organizations, intramurals, and other campus activities; the depth and breadth of contact with other students in the classroom- both those on campus and in campus housing. The primary focus of our study echoes these findings and asserts that students bring such expectations with them when they enroll in college, and that these expectations have much deeper meaning and significance to students than can be obtained by traditional quantitative means, such as a paper and pencil survey.

Students consider multiple and complex interacting variables when developing perceptions concerning their university experiences. Furthermore, it is maintained that a void in the current literature is that most of the available research methodologies do not enable students to articulate the many and varied issues that are considered during the development and evolution of their perceptions regarding the first-year collegiate experience.

Our research endeavor attempted to address this void in the literature. Among the various issues we were interested in addressing were - If we were able to establish a baseline of the expectations that freshmen bring to campus, and if we were able to collect data on student perceptions of their educational experiences, on which issues would the university be able to meet student expectation? Which student expectations are not being adequately addressed? And with what effect? How do students formulate their impressions? What aspects of the collegiate experience are more important than others? What do students think when the university either does not meet their expectations, or they realize that their expectations were unreal/unreasonable? With what effect do these issues impact the development of student perception of their collegiate experience?

A Study of Expectation and Experience during the Freshman Year

The use of reflexive photography to study student perceptions of their institutional experiences is part of a much larger study of the freshman year experience being undertaken by our institution. Two additional research components round out the research design: an entering student expectations survey, and a student experiences survey.

While participating in freshman orientation during the summer of 1997, 750 students were administered the College Student Expectations Survey (CSEX, **cite**). The instrument elicited student expectation measures on experiences within the classroom; expected college workload and grades; estimates of the amount of time the student would spend studying, working, involved in extracurricular and social activities, and the degree to which students rely on a wide array of student affairs and academic support services.

At the close of the 1998 Spring Semester, those students responding to the College Student Expectations Survey were sent a copy of the College Student Experiences Questionnaire . The purpose of the instrument is to collect perceptual data on how students spent their time in course work, the library, contacts with faculty, in extracurricular activities, and in using other facilities and opportunities that exist on the university campus.

The final component of our research on the freshman year experience is the utilization of a qualitative analysis technique called 'reflexive photography' to determine to the degree possible, how and when students formulate their opinions regarding their institutional experiences.

Three fundamental questions were explored within the context of the reflexive photography study: (a) What is the range of freshman impressions of their initial campus interactions?, (b) What meanings do these students give to their impressions of the campus environment?, and (c) To what do these students attribute the formation of these impressions?

Theoretical Paradigm

Two theoretical backgrounds frame this research endeavor:
(a) individual-environmental interaction theories have been developed and applied to the higher education settings, and
(b) symbolic interactionism.

Few of these individual-environmental theories have been examined in any great detail using reflexive photography as a means of collecting data (Banning 1992a, 1992b; Perka, Matherly, Fishman, and Ridge, 1992). Lewin (1936) posited that individual behavior is a function of the interaction between the individual and their environment. Sanford (1966) further elaborated on this development by introducing the idea that this notion of challenge between the individual and their environment must be balanced with environmental support (in the case of the university – student support services – academic, social, etc.).

Pascarella and Terenzini's work on student integration and individual-environmental interactions (1991) can be divided into three distinct subcategories: (1) physical models, (2) human aggregate models, and (3) perceptual models. Chickering and Reisser (1993) offered a fourth subcategory – campus ecology. Of particular utility are the concepts of transactional relationship between students and their environments (the institution), and that personal and collective perceptions of an educational environment are critical to the understanding and prediction of how individuals are likely to act and react in that given environment (Strange, 1991).

The theory of symbolic interactionism (Lewin, 1936) emphasizes the meanings that individuals ascribe to symbols and things through, and as a function of, their social interactions. It also provides a basis for using phenomenologically-oriented individual-environment interaction theories as a foundational framework which we utilized in this study.

A unique aspect of this investigation is that it relies on the use of reflexive photography as the means for data collection. Empirically, photography has been utilized in qualitative research in two distinct ways: as images produced by the researcher and as images produced by the research participants (Cheatwood and Stasz, 1979; Collier and Collier, 1986; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Photographs produced by research participants are referred to as "reflexive photographs". This term was coined by Harper (1987). Interviews that accompany reflexive photographs are often called "photo elicitation interviews".

In her doctoral dissertation on elements of integration for first-year African American students, Douglas (1996) utilized the reflexive photography data collection tool to aid in her development of an integration model for minority students at a predominately white research university. Her research substantiated the validity and reliability in the utilization of reflexive photography in the study of student experience as it pertains to the freshman year experience.

Harper (1988) stated that "In the reflexive photographic method, the subject shares in the definition of the meaning; thus, the definitions are said to "reflect back" from the subject"(pp. 64-65). In our study of freshmen college students, participants produced reflexive photographs as part of the inquiry process and participated in photo elicitation interviews.

Participants and Study Site

Ten first-time, full-time degree-seeking freshmen enrolled Fall 1997 at a public, four-year comprehensive university participated in the study. The study participants were selected from a prospective pool of seven hundred fifty (750 first-time, full-time, degree seeking freshmen who were randomly selected from a freshman class of 1949 to participate in the *College Student Expectations Survey*). Study participants were from different academic majors, some differed by race and gender, two were married, two had children, nine lived in on-campus housing, two were sisters (twins), two competed in varsity intercollegiate athletics, some coming to the university from the institution's primary service area, some were from out-of-state. Most were not first-generation college attenders, and some also had siblings that had either were currently students at or had been graduated from a post-secondary educational institution.

One of the first-time freshmen was a non-traditional student (aged 28). Three worked an average of 18 hours per week in addition to their full-time academic load. Eight of the ten were involved in at least one student campus club or organization. The study participants had a mean first semester grade point average of 2.5 (versus the mean total freshman class first semester GPA of 2.3). Nine of the students relied on one or more forms of financial assistance to help offset their educational expenses.

To assure the anonymity of the study's participants, students were given the opportunity to select a pseudonym for use when the study is presented in photographic, written, or oral form. Students were referred to as Abbey, Mary, Mercedes, Renee, Rob, Becky, Michael, Kirk, Lynn, and John.

Data Collection and Analysis

The freshmen who agreed to participate in the study were required to be involved in the following manner: (a) participate in a one-hour initial interview and project briefing and complete a fairly extensive background questionnaire during the third week of the Spring 1998 semester; (b) take photographs with a 27 exposure disposable camera with built-in flash and pre-loaded color film and record their thoughts in a standard reporter's notebook during the fourth through sixth week of classes; (c) participate in a structured photo elicitation interview during the seventh week of the semester; and (d) participate in a focus-group interview at the end of the ninth week. Study participants also completed a follow-up questionnaire at the close of the focus-group interview.

The objective that study participants were asked to address when the cameras and reporter's notebooks were distributed was *"Take pictures that will illustrate your impression of the University of Southern Indiana or that will help you describe your impressions"*. Additionally, students were asked to record in their notebooks the time and date of the photograph, the primary theme or focus of the photograph, what the photo meant to them and what thoughts and feelings they had that were related to that impression, and what they thought may have influenced and contributed to those thoughts and feelings.

Upon completion of the requisite photography, study participants were given a set of their photographic prints and a photo album. Students were asked to arrange their photographs in a manner that would best illustrate the sum of their institutional experiences or in a manner with which they would feel comfortable in discussing their photographs with the researchers during the photo elicitation interviews. These interviews entailed asking the student to provide detailed verbal explanation of each photograph in their perception portfolio. Upon completion of the students explanation of the individual photographs, they were asked if they had any impressions that they were not able to express visually in a photograph or if they had developed additional perceptions of their institutional experiences that had come to mind since taking the photographs.

We then asked the students to identify their strongest impressions and if they could categorize these impressions as positive, negative, or neutral. Following this discussion, students were queried as to their rationale for the sequential arrangement of their photographs, and how, if at all, their impressions were impacting their behavior. At the close of the photo elicitation interviews, a preliminary analysis was conducted to ascertain the constructs of the development of student perception of their institutional environment.

The concept of "unitizing" and categorization as a means of developing preliminary constructs about individual impressions (Lincoln and Gruba, 1985) was used as a method of data analysis. This method allows for the development and identification of experiential constructs which evolve into readily identifiable themes.

Photographic and Notebook Annotation Themes

Five primary themes, or primary perceptions, emerged from our qualitative data collection. These were (a) the university's physical environment, (b) interactions with faculty, (c) interactions with other students, (d) student support services, and (e) career counseling and preparation for the future. A comprehensive photographic catalog with accompanying written student narrative was created to document the photographic impressions of the students. Due to the complexities inherent in the duplication and inclusion of the photographs, they have been omitted from this paper. The photographs and accompanying student documentation are available through arrangement with the paper authors.

Impression Formulation

When asked to identify the single greatest contributing factor to the formation and development of their perceptions of their collegiate experience, students pointed to their interactions with, and observations of, people. Most impression-shaping interactions occur with their freshmen peers, the faculty who interact with them inside and outside of the classroom, their academic advisors, and university support staff. Students also credited previous interactions with high school teachers and guidance counselors, high school college-bound peers, and family as contributory factors in the development of their perceptions of the University of Southern Indiana.

In the course of our inquiry, we discovered six fundamental "truths" concerning the development and articulation of student impression concerning their educational experiences:

1. The development of student perception is a multifaceted, multidimensional phenomenon;
2. The student's ultimate perception of the educational experience is rarely created from a single identifiable event (good or bad), but a combination of sometimes dissimilar experiences;
3. Student perception can be measured, analyzed, and modified, if necessary;

4. Students place major importance on many aspects of their educational experience that institutions are tempted to discount as trivial – such as mail delivery, campus shuttle and escort services, and continued development of relationships with family, relatives, and friends;
5. Student perception does not succumb to "group think", and
6. Students are very open and honest in their discussions of the development of their impressions and perceptions of their educational experiences.

Discussion

Although our primary intention was to investigate first-year, first-time freshmen impressions of the campus environment, insights were gained about the campus climate which held direct impact on students both positively and negatively.

Some of the positive aspects of the university experience were frequent and meaningful interactions with university faculty, the development of deep friendships with peers, the accessibility of the campus, and the wealth of opportunities for direct student involvement in the daily life of the campus. Students were impressed by the growth of the university's physical facilities, the natural beauty of the campus and its surroundings, as well as the consonance of the student body. A number of students commented that whether on campus or in the student apartments, the university is like "one big, happy, family".

With favor, comes criticism. Students cited the low level of racial diversity among student and faculty populations, the disruption of the on-campus flow of automobile traffic to accommodate current facilities construction, the perceived lack of available computer labs on campus and in housing, the perceived lack of uniform enforcement of campus housing policies and procedures, and certain student services, namely financial aid, as contributing factors to their negative impression of the university.

Conclusion

The study of student perception is a mercurial enterprise. Students take into consideration a myriad of integrated and unbelievably complex issues when forming their opinions, whether positive or negative, about the first year of their collegiate experience. Institutions that are not able to effectively monitor student perception eventually find themselves wrestling with a much more costly issue, namely student attrition.

An institution's ability to cultivate, recruit, and retain students depends largely on the degree to which it can measure student expectation and determine at what point in the student's first year expectation and reality converge. We believe that it is at this point, the convergence of expectation and reality, that students make the decision, either cognitively or unconsciously, to remain or leave their academic institution.

Many of the negative perceptions that students have of the academic enterprise are easily identified and addressed. Many times, effective communication between the institution and the student can diffuse misconceptions of what can be expected of the institution, as well as what the institution will expect in return.

Given the high stakes gamble inherent in much of the retention program development and student attrition analysis, it seems almost unbelievable that institutions would attempt to formulate opinion on student perception without directly asking the student. Many widely-used pencil and paper data collection methods are simply inadequate to yield the depth and breadth of information necessary to make informed decisions concerning student wellbeing during the freshman year.

References

Astin, A.W. 1984. Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *The Journal of College Student Personnel.* 25: 297-308.

Astin, A.W. 1975. *Preventing students from dropping out.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Banning, J. 1992a. Visual anthropology: Viewing the campus ecology for messages of sexism. *The Campus Ecologist,* 10 (1), 1 – 4 .

Braxton, J. 1990. How student choose college. In *The strategic management of college enrollments,* edited by D. Hossler, J. bean, and Associates. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cheatwood, D. and Stasz, C. 1979. Visual sociology. In J. Wagner (Ed.) *Images of information: Still photography in the social sciences.* pp. 261 – 269. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Chickering, A.W. & Reisser, L. 1993. *Education and Identity* (2nd ed.) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Collier, J. and Collier, M. 1986. *Visual anthropology: Photography as a research method* (Rev. ed.). Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.

Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. 1994. Introduction: Entering the field of qualitative research. In Denzin and Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of qualitative research.* pp. 1 – 17 Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Douglas, K. 1996. Impressions: How First-Year African American Students Pictured a Research University. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Albuquerque, NM, 1997.

Evans, N. , Forney, D. & Guido-DiBrito 1998 . *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Feldman, K.A. & Newcomb, T.M. 1994. *The Impact of College on Students.* New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Gardner, J. and A.J. Jewler. 1985. *College is only the beginning.* Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Gordon, V. 1985. Students with uncertain academic goals. In *Increasing student retention,* edited by L. Noel and R. Levitz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harper, D. 1988 . *The Visual Ethnographic Narrative.* Visual Anthropology.

Harper, D. 1987. *Visual Sociology: Expanding Sociological Vision.* The American Sociologist. Spring: 54-70.

Lewin, K. 1936. *Principles of Topological Psychology.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Levine, A. and Cureton, J. 1998. *When Hope and Fear Collide: Understanding Today's College Student.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Levitz, R. & Noel, 1989. Connecting Students to Institutions. Keys to retention and success. In Upcraft, Gardner, and Associates, *The Freshman Year Experience: Helping Students Survive and Succeed in College* (pp. 65 – 81). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Lincoln, Y, and Gruba, E. 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Pace, C. R. 1984. *Measuring the quality of student experience.* Los Angeles: University of California, Higher Education Research Institute.

Pascarella, E. 1985. College environmental influences on learning and cognitive development: Critical review and synthesis. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research. Vol. 1,* edited by J. Smart. New York: Agathon Press.

Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. 1977. Voluntary freshman attrition and patterns of social and academic integration in a university: A test of a conceptual model. *Research in Higher Education.* 6: 25 – 43.

Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. 1978. The relation of students' precollege characteristics and freshman year experience to voluntary attrition. *Research in Higher Education.* 9: 347 – 66.

Pascarella, E. & Terenzini, P. 1991. *How College Affects Students: Findings and Insights from Twenty Years of Research.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pascarella, E., Terenzini, P., and Wolfe, L. 1985. Persistence in higher education: A nine-year test of a theoretical model. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.

Perka, P., Matherly, C., Fishman, D., and Ridge, R. 1992. Using photographs to examine environmental perceptions of African-American and White greek members: A qualitative study. *College Student Affairs Journal.* 12, 7 – 16.

Sanford. N. 1966. *Self and Society: Social Change and Individual Development*. New York: Atherton Press.

Stage, F. 1989. Motivation, academic and social integration and the early drop-out. *American Educational Research Journal*. 26: 385 – 402.

Stage, F. 1989. Reciprocal effects between the academic and social integration of college students. *Research in Higher Education*. 30: 517 – 30.

Strange, C. 1991. Managing college environments: Theory and practice. In T. Miller and R. Winston, Jr. (Eds), *Administration and leadership in student affairs*, pp. 158 – 198. Muncie, Indiana: Accelerated Development.

Tinto, V. 1985. Dropping out and other forms of withdrawal from college. In *Increasing student retention*, edited by L. Noel and R. Levitz. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Tinto, V. 1986. Theories of student departure revisited. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, vol. 2, edited by J. Smart. New York: Agathon Press.

Tinto, V. 1987. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. 1989. Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. In *Journal of Higher Education*. 59-438 – 55.

Waterman, A., and Waterman, C. 1972. Relationship between freshman ego identity status and subsequent academic behavior: A test of the predictive validity of Marcia's categorization system of identity status. *Developmental Psychology*. 6: 179.

Zemsky, R. and Oedel, P. 1983. *The structure of college choice*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.